



Young Roots – Hardwick Dene – Interpreted Evaluation Report

This report evaluates Tees Valley Wildlife Trust's Young Roots project delivered between May and September 2014. It provides a summary of findings, reviews the original aims and objectives, how the project was delivered, the differences made, how it has been evaluated and what has been learned.

Executive Summary

'Hardwick Dene – Interpreted' involved working with three schools local to Hardwick Dene Nature Reserve in Stockton on Tees. The project involved young people exploring wildlife in the Dene, taking part in a variety of environmental work and improvements to the nature reserve. The key aspect of the Young Roots funding programme and of this project was to involve young people wholly in shaping and delivering it.

The evaluation took place on site at Hardwick Dene and at each of the three schools - Bishopsgarth, North Shore Academy and Abbey Hill – qualitative and quantitative surveys and interviews were conducted with 28 pupils over 3 days.

Main findings:

- 15 pupils (%) said they didn't know what to expect from the award, and 27 (%) said they had never heard of John Muir Before this project.
- A range of activities were highlighted as most and least favourite, with no majority linked to any of the four stages of the award.
- 25 pupils reported on a scale of 1-5 that the project had helped them to be kinder to the environment either 'a bit' or 'a lot'.
- 22 pupils reported that the project had helped them find new places to visit either 'a bit' or 'a lot'.
- 100% said everything was explained clearly, rating the project overall at 4.6 out of 5
- Four pupils said that if they could change anything they would like the teachers to get more involved in the activities
- 100% said they wanted to do another John Muir Award with Tees Valley Wildlife Trust, four stating they would like to take part in more activities over a longer time.

The 'Story of Change' behind the project

The overall aim of 'Hardwick Dene - Interpreted' was simply to offer opportunities for young people living in Stockton-on-Tees to engage with, and take ownership of their local natural heritage. After a successful pilot project with Abbey Hill School, Tees Valley Wildlife Trust found that pupils and teachers were very keen to be more involved in improvements at their local nature reserve – Hardwick Dene and that there were further opportunities to reach new pupils too. Being a registered member of the John Muir Trust meant that the Wildlife Trust staff could see the potential for delivering the John Muir Award straight away, primarily because it encourages people not only to explore green places but also to take action in improving and caring for them and spreading the message about them to others in their communities.

Based upon research findings that showed very low levels of children's connections to nature (RSPB) the Wildlife Trust wanted to tackle this, but further they recognised a project like this would be particularly meaningful to urban areas like Stockton, listed highly on the deprivation index and particularly to schools like the three the Trust selected to work with because of the number of pupils with special educational needs, disabilities and sometimes challenging behaviour. The Trust planned, and succeeded, to make a difference in the following ways;

- I. To improve access to Hardwick Dene nature reserve for young people and the wider community to use and explore
- II. To improve habitats for wildlife, caring for the many species unique to the Dene and its associated unique natural heritage
- III. To raise awareness of the nature reserve and its wildlife among young people and the wider community
- IV. To collect and share information about wildlife on the Dene to improve learning about natural heritage

The approved purposes for the project identified by HLF were:

- 🌿 Young people would carry out practical conservation tasks
- 🌿 The profile of the site would be raised
- 🌿 A celebration event would be held in line with achievement of the John Muir Award

The Reality of the Project – what worked and what didn't?

In relation to the four aims and approved purposes detailed above, this project succeeded in making all of the differences it intended in the following ways:

- I. **Improve access to Hardwick Dene nature reserve** – pupils took part in creating and repairing footpaths making them safer and easier for everyone to use, sculptures and signage were repainted to improve existing interpretation
- II. **Improve habitats for wildlife** – pupils planted hundreds of reeds in a large pond on the Dene which will mature to create a wildlife-rich habitat for birds, insects and pond-life

- III. **Raise awareness of the nature reserve** – pupils raised awareness in school through end of project celebration events and at home, but further awareness was raised through local press, use of social media and each school's own method of sharing what they had learned through the award (detailed below)
- IV. **Collect and share information about wildlife**– all pupils collected data through their choice of surveys e.g. butterflies/bugs/air quality, which has been fed back into Trust records. Each school took a different approach to sharing information, Abbey Hill created a leaflet which will be printed and distributed by the Trust, Bishopsgarth designed an interpretation board to be installed on site and North Shore created 'Quick Response ' codes that will be installed on site and link to information online about wildlife

Some minor management issues were identified during this project in association with Tees Valley Wildlife Trust and the partner schools, and although the Trust feel none of these affected the outcomes of the project for the students, they do believe outcomes could be enhanced further if these concerns were addressed if another project were to run. The project officer felt that there was a need to assess the abilities of the students beforehand, for example North Shore students might have been better off doing more art work rather than written, and Abbey Hill also didn't inform the Trust that a member of the group was a wheel chair user (despite required risk assessments being conducted). Perhaps a specific pre-project, brief assessment of the group (with the group themselves perhaps, not only school staff) would be a helpful addition next time. It was also suggested that perhaps in future some of the sessions could be swapped around, some were often limited by time and specifically the interpretation material towards the end did not manage to get finished within the allocated sessions. If the conservation sessions could have been moved to the end this would have meant more time for sharing material which was the emphasis of the project.

It was noted that the teachers were perhaps not as involved in the activities as they could have been, and perhaps needed to be more involved in planning projects like this. This was further indicated through the enthusiasm of staff who had previously been involved in Tees Valley Wildlife Trust's 'Forest Schools' project where there was a lot more time for their input in the development stage and they were more directly involved in delivering certain activities. The Project Officer noted that this was mainly down to lack of experience in outdoor learning rather than unwillingness to get involved, and also that activities went smoother when teachers got involved, e.g North shore litter picking, as the 'lead by example rule' clearly brought more encouragement.

In evaluation the Project Officers and Evaluation Officer felt in hindsight that although valuable, qualitative feedback was collected from all teachers this could have been a more formal process similar to that taken with the students. A short survey designed for teachers could have encouraged more information relating to certain outcomes, and because no standardised questions were used some impacts could have been felt at all three schools but were not necessarily communicated. The Trust feel in particular that teachers impressions of individual students' progress relating to their own complex needs and behavioural changes could be a good boost for any future projects, not just

in evaluation but also encouraging others to get involved. On this point, one Project Officer stated:

“This project has worked really well, I noticed behavioural and attitude changes as young people became more connected to their local wild space and taking part in the John Muir Award allowed the pupils to gain a sense of achievement, which really made the project feel like a success. Seeing young people getting exciting about the activities they were doing and the things they were learning was extremely rewarding and taking part in these activities has had a positive impact on the pupils, the school as a whole and the local community.”

In terms of the data collected from pupils and teachers at all three schools, the results were incredibly positive, demonstrating through surveys and interviews the significant differences this project has had on them, their natural environments and their communities – differences that would be highly unlikely to have occurred without this project. The surveys main findings included;

- ✿ 15 pupils (52%) said they didn't know what to expect, and 27 (93%) had never heard of John Muir before. Many pupils thought the project was going to be “boring” and just “walking round a muddy track”, 27 (93%) said it was not what they expected in a positive way.
- ✿ A range of activities were highlighted as most and least favourite, with no majority linked to any of the four stages of the award. However, 10 pupils commented the activities they disliked most were those that involved getting wet and dirty, some of these were due to the weather whereas others were because of the nature of the activities e.g. planting reeds. Many pupils said it was good they had a range of activities to choose from.
- ✿ 25 pupils (86%) reported on a scale of 1-5 that the project had helped them to be kinder to the environment either ‘a bit’ or ‘a lot’. Several pupils commented that they enjoyed litter picking but found it very upsetting and frustrating to see that people would throw litter in green places. They said they thought that a larger part of the John Muir Award should be about solving this problem in particular through more litter picking and raising awareness.
- ✿ 22 pupils reported the project helped them find new places to visit. This outcome directly relates to the project, because the majority of the pupils who told us they lived near Hardwick Dene had never actually visited it before. However, four of these pupils said that they would be unlikely to visit it again unless the school encouraged them. Teachers said there were not any plans to revisit the Dene after the project ended.
- ✿ 100% of pupils said everything was explained clearly, rating the project overall at 4.6 out of 5, no issues were raised to do with delivery throughout the project.
- ✿ Four pupils said that if they could change anything they would like the teachers to get more involved in the activities; three said that they would like to work more outside than inside and that outdoor activities should be a more regular part of school.
- ✿ 100% said they wanted to do another John Muir Award with Tees Valley Wildlife Trust, four stating they would like to take part in more activities over a longer time. When told that there were further levels to the John Muir Award many of the children and teachers were very enthusiastic, asking ‘when can we do them?’ (Bishopsgarth).
- ✿ Several pupils said they knew the award would teach them about wildlife and involve getting outside, 11 said they expected to ‘explore places’, but expected little more than this.

- 5 pupils also said they thought the award would simply be about gardening.
- ✿ 21 pupils said the project had helped them gain new skills and 23 said they felt it had helped them to be more creative through scrapbooking etc., although several students commented they would have liked to have been more creative outside the classroom.
- ✿ One student commented she would like to volunteer when she is 18 and another will be using Hardwick Dene as inspiration for artwork she is working on at school.
- ✿ Comments from staff included one Bishopsgarth teacher who said the project enabled quieter students to get involved in more group work, helping them gain social skills, communication and confidence.
- ✿ Staff at North shore Academy also told the Trust they felt it was good for the students to get out more and learn by other methods, and that opportunities for both practical learning and learning outdoors were limited. They also noted that the Wildlife Trust's help and support was invaluable in encouraging these changes of operation and exactly the right level of structure and freedom had been achieved on the project.
- ✿ The teacher responsible for the group of young adults at Abbey Hill was particularly enthusiastic about the project in helping certain students to communicate, but also the value of evaluation in achieving this too. He said that one student in particular had "never got so engaged and communicative" with anyone before.

It is clear from the results above that this project, although short, has made a significant difference to the young people involved and to Stockton's local natural heritage. Improvements to access and habitats will be invaluable in future to both people and wildlife. It is more difficult to monitor differences made to the wider community in accessing Hardwick Dene but many pupils said they expected more people to use and their families had commented it was easier to get around. The improvements to learning and enjoyment of the Dene are likely to be vast and will be monitored by staff and volunteers who spend time at the reserve, but also electronically through use of QR codes.

Lessons Learned

While no significant issues were raised during evaluation or delivery of the project, points raised by Trust staff, school staff and the pupils will help us work towards creating an even better project:

The John Muir Award is a tried and tested, highly accessible award and clearly the perfect format for projects bringing young people - particularly those from disadvantaged, urban communities - and nature together. All three schools are very interested in taking part in awards with other classes and/or at higher levels with the same pupils.

While it was not a specific project aim to encourage young people to learn more about John Muir, it became clear during the evaluation that many would have liked to have known more about him, why the award was set up in his name, and how (as a Scottish-American) his work was relevant to Teesside. It was noted Abbey Hill had been involved in the award previously, the pilot and seen a video about John Muir before starting the award and other schools would have benefitted from this.

The end result – while sharing was emphasised as the most important stage of the award, the pupils still needed a reason and opportunity to revisit the Dene and see the fruits of their labours (practical work, QR codes) – Tees Valley Wildlife Trust and the schools could work together to organise celebration events around installations/publications rather than just the achievement of the award.

Perhaps creativity could be encouraged more during the outdoor sessions of the award (weather permitting) through activities that encourage more individual connections with nature and independent choices, some children mentioned den building in particular was a favourite activity and other ‘Bushcraft’ style techniques or artwork could make the programme and its outcomes more personal to each pupil (balanced with group tasks), alongside the John Muir Award journals.

Outdoor wear (!) – One school group in particular had to take part in outdoor activities in unsuitable clothing. The Trust need to ensure that schools are informed about appropriate clothing in advance and further, schools need to ensure children and parents are informed too.

There is need, desire and opportunity here for young people to be more actively involved in monitoring and the whole process of project delivery – the pupils at North Shore Academy in particular were very interested in helping with evaluation and perhaps recording the impacts of their work would be a way of increasing their ownership further as well as their enthusiasm. Naturally doing this would also contribute significantly to communicating the success of work like this to others. This could take the ‘sharing’ element of the award one step further, sharing what they have learned about a green place but also sharing how they have made a difference to it.

The Trust could focus more on attitudes towards the environment and raising awareness of caring for green spaces rather than exploring what is there, in response to the pupils comments that the John Muir Award should tackle issues of littering.

What happens next...?

What the schools will do – Tees Valley Wildlife Trust will encourage the schools worked with to visit Hardwick Dene when installations are made. The schools will be very likely to participate in future outdoor projects and partnerships with Tees Valley Wildlife Trust.

What the pupils will do – Findings suggest the children will explore the Dene and more generally their natural heritage. It is also hoped what pupils learned will influence how they behave in green spaces, possibly further on school work and future development i.e. through volunteering.

What will the Trust do – The Trust will continue to manage the nature reserve, and will organise installation and publication of what the schools have produced. The Trust will also be taking these evaluation findings to develop another project in partnership with these schools (and possibly others) very soon. It is clear that this project has achieved what it set out to, that “young people will learn new skills, discover new passions and play their part as custodians of our wonderful natural heritage” (Ivor Crowther – HLF North East) but there is always more to be done!

